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Teenagers' behaviors and time use respond to changing economic conditions

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Job losses during and after the Great Recession (December 2007–June 2009) have had a tremendous impact on the health and incomes of a large number of Americans. Although numerous research papers have examined the effects of the Great Recession on adults and families, none has specifically focused on effects of the weakening economy on the health behaviors and human capital investments made by teenagers ages 15–18.

Changes in economic conditions may affect 1) the demand for teenage workers, 2) teenagers' future employment expectations, 3) the likelihood of financial and emotional stressors resulting from the job losses experienced by the parents of teenagers or the parents of their classmates, and 4) parental supervision of teenagers because of changes in parents' work hours.

In "Teenagers' risky health behaviors and time use during the Great Recession" (*Review of Economics of the Household*, May 2015), Sabrina Wulff Pabilonia used data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Youth Risk Behavior Survey and the BLS American Time Use Survey to examine the effects of weakening state economic conditions over the 2003–2011 period on teenagers' risky behaviors. The article also looked at how teens allot their time over the day in order to better understand observed changes in their behavior over the business cycle. Some of the factors that may affect teen behavior include changes in parental supervision, changes in time spent working, changes in sports participation, and changes in TV watching. In addition, Pabilonia examined the effects of changing state economic conditions on teenagers' other major uses of time. In particular, she examined effects on investments in schooling-related human capital; these changes could affect the future earnings of this group of young people who are just beginning to enter the labor market.

Pabilonia found that Black teenage boys were less likely to have had sex during poorer economic conditions. This finding was consistent with these boys spending more time with their parents. Consistent with a decrease in parental supervision, Hispanic teenage boys were more likely to have consumed alcohol or smoked marijuana in the past 30 days when the unemployment rate was higher. However, even though non-Hispanic White teenage boys spent less time with their parents as the economy weakened, there were no statistically significant increases in risky behaviors for this group. As the unemployment rate increased, Hispanic teenage boys spent less time playing sports and more time watching time TV and were more likely to become obese.

Teenage girls, in contrast, were not any more or less likely to spend time with their parents during various phases of the business cycle. However, teenage girls shifted their time toward educational activities as opportunities for employment shrank; this could potentially increase their future labor market opportunities. On the other hand, there were signs that teenage girls were stressed during the Great Recession: they slept less, smoked more regularly and, in the case of Black teenage girls, became more likely to drink alcohol.